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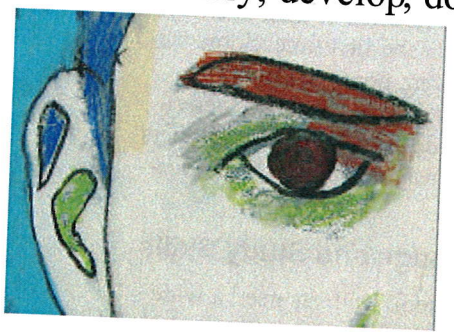
The New School @ Surrey

National Youth Literacy Demonstration Project

Project Update: July 2003

Literacy BC and the Surrey School District have completed the first year of the two-year research and demonstration phase of their project to identify, develop, document, and disseminate effective practices in youth literacy. The project is co-funded by the National Literacy Secretariat and the Crime Prevention Centre. There were many challenges during the year, however, initial findings are quite positive and point to an effective strategy for increasing the literacy skills of at-risk youth, fostering their social development, and assisting them to succeed in high school. A complete report on findings from the first year will be published at the end of August. The following provides a brief snapshot of key findings and project directions for the next school year.



Summary of Year One Research Findings

Referrals and Enrolments

Forty-eight students, aged 15 to 18, were enrolled in the morning and afternoon New School classes. The students were referred to the program by guidance counsellors and teachers because they had significant reading difficulties and were considered to be at high risk of dropping out of school. Some students re-entered after having previously dropped out.

Not all referrals, however, were appropriate. Several students were referred because they had behavioural problems rather than literacy problems. One student had severe neurological problems that inhibited his capacity to learn and function in a group. One student who scored at a college level on the standardized reading assessment was simply in the wrong program.

Some students chose not to remain for an extended period in the program because it was different from what they had expected. A few others were asked to leave because of issues related to drugs and ongoing violence. Still others had to leave the program because their families moved out of the district.

Ultimately, 27 students attended class for all or a significant portion of the year. This cohort is the principal focus of the research on participants.

Education & Attendance Factors

Nearly all of the students had failed to complete the 9th grade and a number had not passed a course in the previous two years. Several of the students were two, three or more years behind in school. Their teachers and guidance counsellors predicted they would not complete high school if they continued in the mainstream educational program. The available alternative programs, which rely heavily on self-paced learning based on readings and worksheets, were not appropriate for students who had difficulty reading and writing.

Most students had a record of weak attendance, often missing over half of their classes in the previous year. Since students cannot learn if they are

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not present, greatly improving attendance has been a key goal of the project. Students were informed that they were expected to be in class and on time if they were to be allowed to remain in the course. Nearly all of the students far exceeded their previous attendance records, in some cases completely changing their attendance patterns. One student, who had missed over half of her classes the year before, missed only one day this year - and that was to attend her grandmother's funeral.

During September, over half of the students enrolled in the morning class attended over 90% of the time. Attendance in the afternoon class was far poorer with only 41% attending 80% or more of the time. Over the next few months, the morning groups attendance fell off somewhat and the afternoon group's attendance improved. By December, as the classes gelled, attendance in both groups met or exceeded that of the regular school system. For the morning group, over 56% attended 90% or more of the time and 62.5% attended 80% or better. In the afternoon group, 50% attended 90% or better and 78.5% attended 80% or better. Attendance fell off somewhat during the last few months of the school year but this is consistent with standard school enrolment patterns.

Reading Levels and Gains

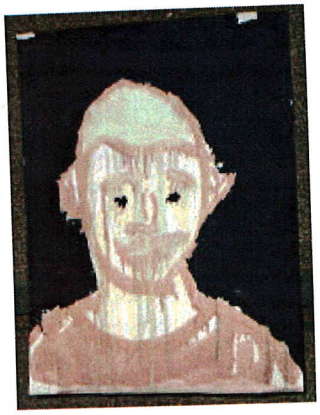
In order to be counted among the research cadre, students must have remained in the program for sufficient time to have taken the standardized reading tests at least two of the three times they were given during the school year. 27 students met this standard.

Of these students, entry summary reading levels on the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test ranged from a low of grade 1.4 to a high of grade 8.7. The median entry reading level was grade 5.4. After 6 months, the median reading level had increased to grade 7.0, and after 9 months it was grade 7.4. On average, reading levels went up approximately 2 grade levels during the year. The highest grade level gain was 3.8. Nearly 15% of the students improved their reading levels by at least 3 grades. 52% of the students improved their reading levels by over 2 grades.

Because the third reading test was given at the very end of the school year, students tended not to take it seriously. Consequently, we consider their final scores somewhat below their actual capability. Teacher and researcher observations document substantial increases in reading for pleasure and academics. They reported changes in literacy related attitudes, behaviours and skills that are generally not captured by standardized tests. Of note, all of the students finished at least one novel during the year, most for the first time. Some students who previously were non-readers would sneak-read their novels during other class activities. Ironically, this made it necessary for teachers to ask students to put away their books to participate in other subjects.

Academic Knowledge and Study Skills

To be successful in school, students need a wide variety of knowledge and skills in addition to basic literacy. The New School program seeks to balance and integrate literacy development along with behavioural change, acquisition of academic knowledge, and development of skills and attitudes necessary for facilitated and self-directed learning.



Our students were weak in all of these areas. Initially, the writing and math levels of students were at least as low as the reading levels. Many students could not complete basic multiplication tables. Some had difficulty adding a short column of numbers.

Nearly all of the students, having been unable to read assignments and textbooks for many years, were far behind in their basic academic knowledge related to science, social studies, and English. Moreover, having essentially written off the possibility of success in school, most had not developed practical study skills. All but a few had great difficulty completing homework.

The students could not read the standard science textbook, which is written at a 9th to 12th grade level, and they lacked prerequisite background knowledge and vocabulary. In order to make the science topics more accessible, we adapted and

wrote condensed papers with ample illustrations that highlighted key concepts. These materials are being revised and extended for the second year and supplemented with increased multimedia materials and hands-on projects. Based on the first year experience, consultants have been hired to prepare appropriate curricula this summer for math, English, and social studies.

Technology Integrated Throughout

The New School program is designed around a "multiple intelligence" model that emphasizes multiple ways for acquiring and demonstrating knowledge and skills. Technology and the arts play a key role in helping students explore their inner and outer worlds and experience success. A computer is available for each student. Through completion of projects, they learn to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Excel. They also learn to conduct research using reliable sources on the Internet. In addition, students develop skills in capturing and processing digital pictures to include in their projects.

These processes were extended to the use of digital video to conduct interviews and capture animations. Initially, glitches in technology hindered the learning process more than it facilitated it. However, over the year, these were largely ironed out and students began using the technology as tools rather than ends in themselves. Computers and other technology will be upgraded over the summer to minimize potential glitches once school begins.

Arts Component

The arts component is an integral part of the program overall. The students meet with art teachers one day of the week (25% of the 4-day school week). This is a significant investment of the limited time available for learning but all staff agree that it is an essential part of the learning model. The art lessons generally parallel themes being taught in the academic or pre-academic program. Explorations of self, family and community are critical aspects of adolescent development and are incorporated into both the academic and arts components. The arts in particular allow students who must struggle with literacy to experience success.

As the self-portraits included in this paper illustrate, the arts can be a powerful vehicle and metaphor for students to explore and define who they are and who they will become. These self-portraits are done by the same student (classified as severe learning disabled and testing in at a grade 1.4 reading level). They are shown in sequence from his first self-portrait to his final project to draw himself as he will be in the future.

Families in Crisis

Education and learning are not isolated activities separate from everything else that happens in life. The New School seeks to identify turbulence factors that inhibit learning and, to the extent possible, either help lessen these factors or help the youth to become more resilient in dealing with them. The program uses a "Life Matrix" to identify where students and their families are on a scale from "Crisis" to "Thriving" related to seven social indicators, including: Family Relations, Employment, Finances, Shelter, Health and Safety, Social and Emotional Health, and Education and Development.

Many, but by no means all, of the students' families had significant financial problems. 62% of families were identified as financially either in crisis or vulnerable. In the area of housing, 67% of families were identified as in crisis or vulnerable. Families with insufficient income and unstable living conditions have great difficulty in supporting the academic efforts of their struggling children. For many of the students, the New School became the only place where formal learning occurred and was fostered. To create opportu-

nities to do homework beyond scheduled class hours, the program is instituting "Learning Club" to be offered before and after class and staffed by volunteers for next year.

Violence Factors

Physical violence and abuse have played a central role in the lives of most of the students - either as perpetrators or victims - often both. Seventy three percent of the students have been identified as having been involved in significant violence in their lives - some as victims of physical and/or sexual abuse, while others have a long track record of abusing others. Thirty percent of students either self-report or are identified in school records as having participated in gang violence. At least 24% of the students have been charged or convicted of criminal activity - the majority of these were charged with criminal assault. Many more students appear to have participated in similar activities but were not caught or charged. Although analysis is not complete, early indicators show that we have been successful in decreasing the violent behaviour of these youth and in teaching strategies that allow students to manage their anger.

Violence is both a problem in itself and a symptom of a wide range of other problems. In order to cope with these issues, the New School employs a full-time counsellor who conducts classroom activities related to personal development and behaviour, assists in crisis intervention, provides individual counselling for students and helps parents cope with life challenges. She also guides the discussion of students' non-academic development in staff meetings. As with the arts component, the counselling position is seen by staff as critical to the success of the program overall.

During this past year the counsellor led in the implementation of a "restorative justice" system to deal with violence among students. It is critical that the classroom environment be perceived by students as safe and supportive. Bullying, harassment or intimidation cannot be allowed. However, a "one-strike and you're out" system risks elimination of many students who are in most need of the program's literacy services. The restorative justice system allows for the immediate removal of offending students from the classroom and a progressive reintegration of the student based on a set of behavioural criteria.

Program Modifications for Next Year

Because of the very low reading levels of the target population, their demonstrated lack of academic background knowledge, and parallel lack of learning skills, it became clear during the year that

for most students it would be impossible to remediate all of these deficits sufficiently for them to enter 11th grade. Although nearly all students made significant progress in their academic knowledge and literacy skills, we recommended that all but a few students continue with the program for another year. We think a two-year program is a more realistic arrangement for students who read or write far below grade level, who have missed significant amounts of school, and who need to develop the social and emotional maturity to succeed in group environments.

From a One-Year to a Two-Year Program

For the next school year, the New School will offer an entry-level program, which will focus primarily on the development of literacy, behavioural, and study skills as well as general background knowledge in academic subjects. Students who enroll in this program will receive high school credit for Information Technology 10, Visual Arts 10, and Career and Personal Planning (CAPP) 10. By not having to be graded on English, Science and Social Studies subjects, the stu-

dents will have more time to develop essential basic skills and background knowledge.

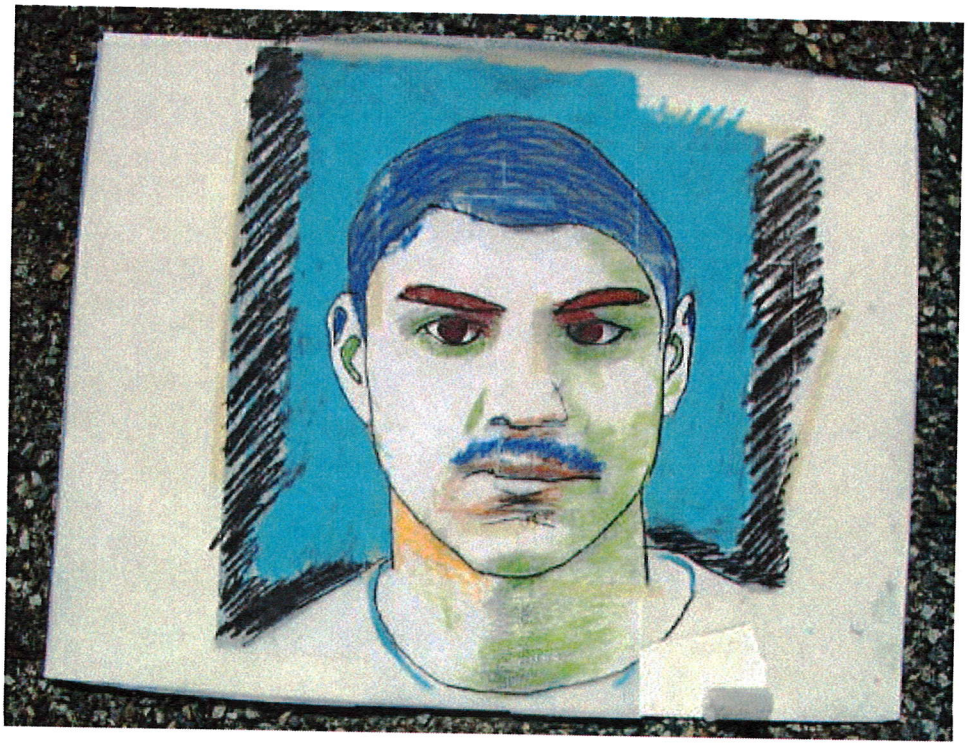
Only after completing this first year class will students be allowed to enroll in the grade 10 academic program. Next year's students will be comprised entirely of students who completed the program this year. They will receive credit for English 10, Science 10, Social Studies 10, Visual Arts 11, and CAPP 11. This second year program will have more academic rigour, but will continue the focus on development of literacy skills. Nearly all of the students for whom staff recommended this option agreed to return for next year.

Refined and More Integrated Curriculum

All of the curricula are currently under revision. All new math and social studies curricula are being prepared for second year students. The second year English and science curricula are being revised and extended. Curriculum for technical skills development and first year background knowledge development are also being created. And the CAPP social skills development component is being expanded for both years one and two. All of these materials focus on the essential knowledge and skills required and have reading materials and other media specifically chosen and adapted for adolescents with significant reading difficulties. Curriculum activities for all components are being designed to integrate with and supplement each other.

After Hours Learning Club

The ability to do homework is a critical skill for success in high school - one that none of the students this year brought with them. In order to extend the facilitated learning period and assist students to get in the habit of completing homework, a one to two-hour homework club facilitated by adult volunteers will be available at the beginning and end of classes.

In Sum

Staff, students and researchers faced significant challenges during the first year, and we experienced many growing pains. Our research, however, shows that for the most part, the youth who participated showed significant gains - though some more than others, depending on their level of commitment to learning. By and large, students showed improvement in the areas we had identified as critical to their success as individuals, learners, citizens, and future workers. By taking a holistic approach to teaching and learning, we have been able to address many of the social and emotional needs of these young people, while increasing their literacy skills and preparing them for more rigorous academic work.